

(BARBARA CASASOLA, ITALY)

MEDIEVAL MODERN: A designer's peaceful home in a Florentine palazzo.

WORDS Laura Rysman PHOTOS Cecilie Jegsen

When I arrive at Palazzo Guicciardini in Florence, tourists are pressed against the iron gates, jostling for a view of this medieval marvel. They aim their phone cameras toward the palazzo's serene garden, with its meticulous topiary and blooming rose bushes bordered by the Medici's famous Vasari Corridor.

For Barbara Casasola, a fashion designer who has cultivated a passionate following for her essentialist clothing line, this is not a landmark—it's home. I squeeze past the crowd of tourists and head upstairs, where she greets me at the door and leads me into her living room. It neighbors the apartment of the Guicciardini descendants; the family has owned this palazzo for hundreds of years.

In the 13th century, these quarters housed the famously humble and beatific St. Philip Benizi, who hid himself away rather than take on the role of pope. "I think you can feel that presence—there's still a real sense of peace here," says Casasola. Many of the apartment's historical details have remained intact, with a trompe l'oeil mural of flowered coffers on the vaulted ceiling, as well as doors and shutters painted with

florid heraldry. This is largely down to good luck: Palazzo Guicciardini was one of only a few buildings on this street to survive the mine explosions set by retreating Nazis.

Despite its medieval roots, the space feels airy and modern, with mid-century furniture and a pair of jungle-sized potted plants, plus several racks of Casasola's designs; the palazzo doubles as her showroom. In the foyer, amid framed shots by the 1990s-era Maison Margiela photographer Mark Borthwick, a good friend, Casasola shows me her new bucket bag design. It's the brand's first-ever purse, crafted at the same Tuscan workshop that Bottega Veneta employs. The bag is exacting and clean-lined, but free of rigidity—the essence of her simple style. She then pulls out a brown sweater-dress in silk cashmere that features a knit tunic tied at the waist. It's a bit "Franciscan monk," she jokes, but streamlined into functional, contemporary layers that eliminate the need for a coat. Rejecting the quick-change cycle of the fashion calendar, the collection is built of high-quality wardrobe heroes in natural tones, like the wheat-hued knit tank dress Casasola wears the day we meet.

"As a designer, you have a necessity to make stuff, but what you make has to matter," she says. Everything must be "more than utilitarian: It has to have soul." Next to Marzio Cecchi's 1970s curved Banana Leaf wicker chair, a honey-colored cotton macramé dress hangs in the window, the fruit of 40 hours of hand-knotting by a craftswoman in Puglia.

Casasola wears no makeup or nail polish and looks elegant and arresting; a designer's line drawing come to life. "The goal is to change the mentality. I want to be a solution for women," she says, citing her many "converted" friends who have simplified their wardrobes, like the artist Lola Schnabel, whose artichoke ceramics rest on the table. The Casasola client rejects glitz and trends in favor of enduring style and low-impact consumption. "We are the Italian answer to this change. We're small. We're independent. But we have the best quality, the best supply chain and real values," she explains.

In 2019, the Brazilian-born designer relocated from London to Florence, the city where she first began her career at Roberto





Cavalli in the late 2000s, a few years before founding her own brand in 2012. “We’re in the heart of craftsmanship here in Florence, so I can create more, and I can have a humane, one-on-one relationship with the artisans, but I also wanted to reduce my carbon footprint and stop shipping samples back and forth,” she says.

“And here,” she confides, leaning back on a white linen couch she designed herself, “I have the most chill life.”

Casasola points to another white seat, this one like an amusement park’s teacup ride: the 1966 Cesare Leonardi–designed semisphere of fiberglass on a swivel base. It is her morning meditation spot, she says, and one of many pieces on long-term loan from the Simone Begani gallery in Florence. Having her showroom at home, in this photogenic palazzo, allows Casasola to work in proximity to her husband and toddler and to furnish the space in collaboration with galleries. From her first venture with the Brazilian design specialists at Etel gallery in Milan, she retained a 1951 Lina Bo Bardi

chair tipped with a brass sphere. From Begani, she currently has a slew of works, including an Andrea Branzi wood sculpture, a pair of gracefully squat “925” leather armchairs by Afra and Tobia Scarpa, and a monumental white coffee table on plexiglass legs by Roberto Monsani. On the coffee table, a giant tome on Jung sits beside our half-eaten baked grape rolls, a delicacy in Florence during the harvest season.

The curated showroom seems almost too perfect for a real living space, or at least for one with a small child around, but Casasola has given over the kitchen to her son, who’s filled its walls with his exuberant finger paintings. “I wanted to practice attachment parenting,” she says, “and the only way I could do that and keep working was to have my work at home.”

Her son ambles across the room and accepts a bit of sweet roll before crawling onto Casasola’s lap for a hug. It is indeed a chill life, but it’s this tranquility, expressed in her clothes, that imbues her designs with their galvanizing power.

(left) Casasola is pictured in a 1966 fiberglass chair by Cesare Leonardi, who is perhaps best known as a landscape architect and the author of the influential 1983 book *The Architecture of Trees*.







(previous) Much of the furniture at Casasola's studio is on loan from the Simone Begani Fine Arts Gallery, a boutique gallery located in Florence between the neighborhood of San Frediano and Piazza Santo Spirito.